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The Myſteries *of the Chriſtian Religion credible.*

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A

SERMON

Preach'd before the

Univerſity of *OXFORD*,

At St. MARY's,

On *Sunday*, *October* the 21*ſt* 1722.

By JOHN CONYBEARE, M. A.
Fellow of *Exeter* College in *Oxford.*

—[*Let us*] *conſider the Weakneſs of our Minds, and the Narrowneſs of our Capacities; and have but Humility enough to allow, that there may be many Things which we cannot fully comprehend; and that God is not bound in all he does to ſubject his Ways of Operation to the Scrutiny of our Thoughts, and confine himſelf to do nothing but what we muſt comprehend.* Mr. Lock's *Examination of* Malebranche's *Opinion.* Sect. 2.

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A SERMON

Preach'd before the

Univerſity of *OXFORD.*

1 COR. XIII. 12.

For now we ſee thro' a Glaſs darkly, but then face to face: Now I know in part, but then ſhall I know even as alſo I am known.

THESE Words repreſent to us the Imperfection of our preſent Conceptions in *Divine* Matters, and that more clear and full View of them which is reſerv'd for the Happineſs of another Life. In Compaſſion to us indeed God hath been pleas'd to aid the Infirmities of our Nature: To ſet before us the moſt excellent Rule of Life; --To enforce the Obſervance of it by the greateſt Sanctions; --And to propoſe ſuch

Truths to us, as (if duly attended to) will yet farther quicken us in our Duty: But ſtill the Knowledge which hath been communicated to us is but *in part*. Light there is let in upon us anſwerable to the Neceſſities of our preſent State; ſufficient to guide us in the Ways of our Duty, and to bring us to an eternal Happineſs: However, tho' God hath been pleas'd to relieve our Wants, he hath not gratify'd our Curioſity.

As yet *we ſee thro' a Glaſs darkly*: Our intellectual Sight is aided indeed by the Revelation which hath been given us. We have a more clear, and better View of *ſome* things than we had before; and *others* do now appear to us, of which we had before no View at all: Notwithſtanding this, our Conceptions are, in many Points, indiſtinct. Or rather, (as this Paſſage may be interpreted more agreeably with the Intention of the Apoſtle,) our Knowledge in Divine Matters is not *direct* and *immediate*, but as it were *by Reflection*. Theſe are often repreſented to us by ſome remote Reſemblance they have with things of Senſe: and therefore tho' our Knowledge of them be, as far as it goes, true; yet muſt it be allow'd to be very ſhort and imperfect.

Thus, as the Apoſtle expreſſes it, *we know but in part*; and muſt be contented to do ſo, till *that which is perfect ſhall come*. In the mean time it becomes us rather to be thankful that we know ſo much, than impatient that we know not more; rather to improve to pious Purpoſes the Light which hath been given us, than to ſhut our Eyes to it, becauſe it is not greater: Let us embrace with an humble Faith the Great *Myſteries* of our Religion, and adore thoſe Truths which we cannot comprehend. This

This is, I conceive, the natural Result of such a Consideration; but yet a quite different use hath been made of it. There are some who have rejected our whole Religion, because it contains such Doctrines in it as are *incomprehensible*; or, as they are pleas'd, (tho' improperly,) to term them, *unintelligible*. This is the Case of some of our modern *Deists*; who being unable to prove any Contradiction in our Religion, either express, or by consequence, urge, that they cannot be oblig'd, nor are able to give their Assent to any Doctrine which is incomprehensible.

But whatever Force may be thought to be in this way of Reasoning, yet must it be urg'd with a very ill Grace by those, who run themselves on greater Difficulties than they endeavour to avoid; and this is the Case of those modern Infidels, who plead the Incomprehensibility of some of its Articles, as an Argument against the Truth of Christianity: For, He who pretends to reject a Doctrine purely because he does not fully comprehend it, ought, for stronger Reasons, to admit a Religion, where he can't answer the Arguments on which 'tis built. If a Proposition is therefore to be exploded, because we have *inadequate* Ideas of its Parts, much more ought a Religion to be admitted, where the direct Proof of it is unanswerable. Our Adversaries should therefore shew where the direct Proof of our Religion fails: They should prove, either that the Facts alledg'd were Cheats, or insufficient to bear the Consequence deduc'd from them. But so long as these Points are untouch'd, our Religion will maintain its Ground. Mankind is not yet so far lost to the first Principles of Reason,

as to admit bare Difficulties againſt Demonſtration; nor are Perſons of cool Senſe to be perſwaded, that the ſtrongeſt Evidence, ariſing even from *clear* Ideas, is to be rejected, becauſe in ſome Points our Notions may be *obſcure*.

Of this the Followers of *Socinus* have been ſo ſenſible, that tho' labouring under the ſame unreaſonable Prejudices againſt the Belief of *Myſteries*, they yet contend for the Truth of our Religion. The Method therefore in which they pretend to proceed, is this, *viz.* To ſearch, whether thoſe Paſſages of Scripture, on which ſeveral *myſterious* Doctrines have been built, may not be capable of a different Interpretation: And being before-hand reſolv'd againſt any Interpretation which carries with it a *Myſtery*, they have often fix'd on ſuch, as is moſt remote from the common Acceptation of the Words, and moſt diſagreeable with the main Scope of the Writer.

It ſhall be my preſent Endeavour to refute this pernicious Error: and in order to it I will

Firſt, State the Notion of a *Myſtery*; ſhewing withal how far we maintain that our Aſſent is due to the Myſteries of *Chriſtianity*.

Secondly, I will prove, that the *Myſterioufneſs* of theſe Doctrines is, of itſelf, no Argument againſt the receiving them: and conſequently, that no Advantage can be taken from hence, either by the *Deiſt* on the one hand, or the *Socinian* on the other.

After which I will in the

Laſt Place, Make ſome proper Reflexions upon the whole.

I am

I am to begin with ſtating the Notion of a *Myſtery*. It will not ſignify much to our preſent Purpoſe to carry our Enquiries ſo far back as the firſt uſe of the Word;--or whether it might not originally ſignify, *any ſacred Rite, or Doctrine.* It will be ſufficient to remark, that the Word is here to be underſtood of *ſomething hidden, or conceal'd*; and accordingly, that by thoſe who treat of this Subject it is generally underſtood, either of ſuch Doctrines only, as were *wholly*, or *in part unknown* 'til deliver'd by our Saviour and his Apoſtles; --or of ſuch as, being reveal'd, we are ſtill *incapable of comprehending*.

'Tis not to be denied but that the Word is often us'd in the former Senſe, even in the holy Scriptures themſelves: and if we underſtand it in this Senſe only, the *Socinians* are ready to join with us; allowing that the Chriſtian Religion contains ſeveral myſterious Doctrines, if *myſterious* ſignifies nothing more, than Doctrines unknown 'til reveal'd.

The Point therefore, in which they differ from us, is this; We affirm that there are ſeveral Doctrines *above our Reaſon*; and which we are ſtill incapable of comprehending, notwithſtanding the Revelation which hath been made to us concerning them: They affirm on the contrary, that there is nothing in the Chriſtian Religion *above our Reaſon*; nothing but what by a due uſe of our Faculties we are able to comprehend: And in conſequence of this they reject ſuch Interpretations of Scripture, as carry with them any thing incomprehenſible.

This then is what we mean by a *Myſtery* in the preſent Diſpute, *viz.* A Doctrine which is ſo *above our Reaſon*, that we are *incapable of com-*

comprehending it; A Doctrine concerning which our Ideas are, either *inadequate*, or *indeterminate*; and therefore ſuch, the Connexion of whoſe parts we are incapable, in many Inſtances, of diſcerning; or at leaſt, of anſwering numberleſs Queſtions that may be rais'd about them.

It will not be improper to make ſome more particular Remarks on this Account of a *Myſtery*, as it will ſerve to clear the Way to the Second General Head, and to obviate the moſt material Difficulties which have been ſtarted on this Subject.

I obſerve, Firſt, that the Term *Myſterious* hath a *relative* Senſe; and implies a reſpect to that Perſon's Underſtanding, to whom a Thing is myſterious. There is no Doctrine *abſolutely* and *in itſelf* myſterious; *i. e.* There is no Doctrine above the Comprehenſion of *all* Underſtanding. All the ſeveral Agreements, Diſagreements and Relations of Things are capable of being underſtood and comprehended. And ſince there is a Mind actually exiſting endu'd with *abſolute* Knowledge, we are farther aſſur'd, that they are actually underſtood and comprehended. It remains, that nothing is *in itſelf* myſterious; and that whatever thinking Man uſes the Term, he muſt underſtand it in a *relative* Senſe.

It was therefore a mean Artifice in the Author of *Chriſtianity not Myſterious*, to repreſent Divines as contending, * "That there are ſome "Chriſtian Doctrines ſo myſterious as to be *in themſelves inconceivable.* It is allow'd that there are ſome by *Us* incomprehenſible, but not *abſolutely* and *in themſelves* inconceivable.

* See Mr. *Toland*'s Chriſtianity not Myſterious. p. 72. Ed. 2. *Lond.* 1696.

Upon

Upon this *relative* Senſe of the Word *Myſtery* we may remark farther, that from hence appears the difference between thoſe Doctrines which are *Myſterious* and *above our Reaſon*, and thoſe which are *contrary* to it. The former only imply a Diſproportion between the Object and our intellectual Faculties; and are therefore ſuch as we can determine nothing particularly about, from barely conſidering the things themſelves: But the latter are ſo far level with our Capacities, that we plainly diſcern their Impoſſibility. And therefore there is as much Difference between them, as there is between *Light* and *Darkneſs*, between *ſeeing* and *not-ſeeing*.--To proceed;

I have before obſerv'd, that by *Myſterious* Doctrines we mean ſuch, concerning which our Ideas are either *inadequate* or *indeterminate*. This Account ſuppoſes that of theſe myſterious Doctrines we have *ſome Ideas*; we have *Ideas*, tho' ſuch as are either *partial*, or *indeterminate*.

Indeed where we can frame *no* Ideas, we can, ſtrictly ſpeaking, give no Aſſent. For what is *Aſſent*, but a Perception, or at leaſt a firm Perſwaſion, that the Extreams in a Propoſition do agree; or diſagree? But where we have *no manner* of Ideas of theſe Extreams, we can have no ſuch Perception, or Perſwaſion. And as no Combination of Terms *really inſignificant*, can make a *real* Propoſition; ſo no Combination of Terms *to us perfectly unintelligible*, can with reſpect *to us* be accounted Propoſitions.

We do maintain therefore that we have *ſome* Ideas even of *myſterious* Doctrines. And thus, I conceive, we are ſufficiently guarded againſt an Objection ſometimes made againſt us as contending for *unintelligible* Doctrines. There is a vaſt

vaſt Difference between *unintelligible* and *incomprehenſible*. That is, ſtrictly ſpeaking, *unintelligible*, concerning which we can frame *no* Ideas; and that only *incomprehenſible*, concerning which our Ideas are *imperfect*. It is plain therefore, that a Doctrine may be Intelligible, and yet Incomprehenſible.

Nay, I ſhall adventure to maintain, that there are ſeveral Propoſitions of whoſe Extreams we have Ideas, but are yet incapable of diſcerning how far theſe Extreams do agree, or diſagree. For ſince this Agreement or Diſagreement, is, in moſt caſes, to be prov'd by the uſe of ſeveral *intermediate* Ideas, in all thoſe Inſtances in which we fail of intermediate Ideas, we are incapable of diſcerning whether they do agree, or diſagree. In all ſuch Inſtances the Propoſitions are *intelligible*, and yet *incomprehenſible*.

The *Incomprehenſibility* therefore of certain Doctrines in our Religion does not ariſe from our having *no* Ideas of them; but from hence, that our Ideas are either *inadequate*, or *indeterminate*. I conceive it is very evident, that there may be *infinite Relations* of one thing to another, which, for want of adequate Ideas, will be to us *undiſcernable*: But any Propoſitions, with reſpect to ſuch undiſcernable Relations, will, when propos'd, be to us *myſterious*: And conſequently, thoſe who explode *all Myſteries*, can maintain their Ground only by aſſerting, that *all* their Ideas are *adequate*: A Perfection which the ſober part of Mankind will be very backward in allowing them.

Beſide this, there are other things concerning which our Ideas are *indeterminate*. The Improtance of the Obſervation will beſt appear by

by conſidering, that in thoſe Revelations which God is pleas'd to make, he deals with us as Men, and does not produce in us any new Faculties, different from what we had before. If the Doctrines reveal'd are made up of ſuch Ideas, as we are capable of receiving in the *ordinary* Methods of Knowledge, then the Revelation is, either a farther Enforcement of ſuch Truths, as might *naturally* be known, or a Diſcovery of ſuch Truths, as (for want of *adequate* Ideas) could *not* naturally be known. But it hath happen'd, in ſome Inſtances, that the Doctrines reveal'd are made up of ſuch Ideas, as we are incapable of receiving in an *ordinary* way: Such are the Doctrines, Concerning *The Generation of the Son of God: The Diſtinction between the Perſons in the Ever-bleſſed Trinity*, and the like. In theſe Caſes the Ideas are themſelves *reveal'd*; --reveal'd, I ſay, *not* by producing in us any new Faculties of receiving them, but by repreſenting them by ſome other Ideas, with which they have a remote *Reſemblance* and *Analogy*.

And this Account, I preſume, exactly agrees with what the Apoſtle delivers in the Words of my Text, *Now we ſee thro' a Glaſs:* Our preſent Knowledge of theſe Matters is not by Ideas, *immediately* deriv'd from the things themſelves, but by ſuch as are *analogous* to the things they repreſent. Thus we ſee as *by Reflection from a Glaſs*, not *face to face*.

Such *analogous* Ideas may, I conceive, be properly enough call'd *indeterminate*; as not *preciſely* and *diſtinctly* repreſenting the things they ſtand for. And if any Difficulty be made about this Expreſſion, and it ſhould be urg'd (as poſſi-

bly it may) that an *indeterminate* Idea is *no* Idea at all, I would deſire to know, whether we have any Idea of *Subſtance*; and if it be allow'd that we have, whether This be any other than *indeterminate*; as being none other than the Idea of *a certain unknown Support of Accidents, or Modes.* But in thoſe Doctrines of which our Ideas are *indeterminate*, 'tis no wonder if we are incapable, either of *diſcerning* their Truth from barely conſidering the things themſelves; or of anſwering *all* Difficulties that may be rais'd about them.

From what hath been already offer'd an Anſwer may be fram'd to an Objection ſometimes made againſt us, *viz.* How can a thing be *reveal'd*, and yet *myſterious?* The *Truth* of the Propoſition is reveal'd; The *Manner how* 'tis true may notwithſtanding remain a Secret. We are certain that whatever God declares muſt be true; We may be certain that ſuch or ſuch Propoſitions have been declar'd by God; and if ſo, that there is a *real* Connexion between the Parts of them, tho' (for want of *adequate*, or *determinate* Ideas) we may be incapable of *diſcerning* it. Thus we are certain, even from natural Arguments, that there can be but *One* Divine Nature; But it hath been declar'd in Scripture, that the *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Ghoſt* are each of them diſtinctly *God*; and conſequently, that theſe *Three* are *One:* The *Truth* of the Propoſition is reveal'd; The Manner *how* it can be true is ſtill a *Myſtery.*

And accordingly our Aſſent to ſuch Propoſitions, is, a certain Perſwaſion that thay are really *True*, tho' of themſelves *inevident*; a Perſwaſion of their *Truth*, without concerning ourſelves about the *Manner* of it. For ſince Faith

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is founded on *Revelation*, we can be requir'd to believe a Thing no farther than 'tis *reveal'd*; And ſince this Revelation concerns only the *Truth* of the Propoſition, 'tis plain that our Faith can reach no farther; And conſequently, when we contend for believing the *Myſteries* of Religion, we mean no more than giving an Aſſent to thoſe *Doctrines* which are myſterious; without requiring any thing *particular* to be believ'd concerning the *myſterious Part* of them, or the unknown *Manner* of their Truth.

I ſhall paſs now to my *Second* General Head, *viz.* To prove that the *Myſteriouſneſs* of a religious Doctrine is, of itſelf, no ſufficient Argument againſt receiving it. And this I ſhall endeavour, by reſolving the *Denial* of religious Myſteries into its proper *Principles*; and by ſhewing that they are *unreaſonable* and *abſurd*.

Whoſoever therefore rejects a religious Doctrine *purely* becauſe it is *myſterious*, muſt proceed on one or other of theſe Principles; Either,

1. That whatſoever is myſterious is *falſe*; Or,
2. That we can have no ſufficient Evidence that any *particular* Doctrine is *true*, which is myſterious; Or elſe,
3. That 'tis unreaſonable to ſuppoſe that God ſhould make any Doctrine a matter of *Revelation*, and as ſuch neceſſary to be receiv'd, without giving us *clear*, and *adequate* Ideas of the Thing reveal'd.

For, if a Doctrine may be yet *true* notwithſtanding its being myſterious: And if there may be *ſufficient Evidence* of its Truth: And, Laſtly, if there be nothing unreaſonable in ſuppoſing

that a myſterious Doctrine ſhould be matter of *Divine Revelation*, then the *Myſterioufneſs* of a religious Doctrine is no Argument againſt its being *receiv'd* as true.

I ſhall begin with examining the Firſt Principle into which the *Denial* of Myſteries may be reſolv'd, *viz.* That whatſoever is myſterious is *falſe*.

Let us take with us a Remark which I before offer'd, *viz.* That the Term *Myſtery* hath a *relative* Senſe, and implies a reſpect to that Perſon's Underſtanding to whom a thing is myſterious: It will appear from hence, that a Doctrine is ſo far to any Man *myſterious*, as he cannot, or does not comprehend it. And if a myſterious Doctrine be therefore *falſe*, Theſe Conſequences will follow; ---That the Knowledge of the moſt *ignorant* Perſon is the Standard of Truth; ---That there can be no *real* Difference in Men's intellectual Attainments; ---and no *real* Progreſs made in Knowledge. For, if every myſterious Doctrine be *falſe*; and if every Doctrine not comprehended by the moſt *ignorant* Perſon be *to him* myſterious; then, every *ſuch* Doctrine is falſe. It follows, that *all* Truth is by him comprehended; *i. e.* that *his* Underſtanding is the Meaſure of Truth; That no One Man can be *really* more knowing than another; and no Man *really* more knowing at One time, than at another. ---So fruitful is one Abſurdity of many more!

But our Adverſaries will perhaps hope to ſave all by a Retreat; and tell us, that by *Myſtery* is not to be underſtood any Doctrine actually *not comprehended* by Man; but ſuch only as is *incomprehenſible* by Man; and, that whatſoever is incom-

incomprehenſible by Man, muſt be falſe. The Reply to this is obvious:

1. Many things may be incomprehenſible by us in *this* State, which may be eaſily comprehended by us in a *future* State of more perfect Knowledge; as there are many things incomprehenſible by us in a State of *Childhood*, which are eaſily comprehended in our *riper* Age: And therefore, the *preſent* Incomprehenſibility of things is no Argument againſt their Truth.

Again; The leaſt Acquaintance with the World muſt aſſure us, that there is a Difference of Parts in different Men; or, that there is in them a different *Capacity* of Knowledge. It will be readily allow'd by any thinking Man, that there are a vaſt Number of Perſons *incapable*, by the utmoſt Labour and Study, of entering into all the deep Reaſonings of a Mathematician: 'Tis certain then, that there are many Truths actually *comprehended* by ſome Men, which are by others *incomprehenſible*. But we can as eaſily conceive an Order of Beings ſuperior to the *wiſeſt* Men in Knowledge, as conceive *ſome* Men ſuperior to *other* Men in Knowledge: And if what is incomprehenſible by *ſome* Men may be comprehenſible by *others*, then what is incomprehenſible by *all* Men, may be comprehenſible by other *ſuperior Beings*.

Add to this, that as Creatures we muſt be *dependent* and *finite*; and that whatſoever is finite in its *Nature*, muſt be finite in its *Attributes*. The Conſequence will be, that every Creature muſt be bounded in its *Capacity of Knowledge*. Or thus; No Being can be endu'd with abſolute *Knowledge*, unleſs it be endu'd with abſolute *Perfection*: And no Being can be endu'd with

abſo-

abſolute Perfection, but the *Supreme ſelf-exiſtent* Being. From hence it follows, that there muſt be an infinite Number of Truths actually *comprehended* by the Self-exiſtent Being, and yet *incomprehenſible* by the moſt perfect Creature; *i. e.* There muſt be an infinite Number of Truths to *us* myſterious.

To aſſert therefore, that whatever is incomprehenſible by us is *falſe*, is in effect to aſſert, that *all* Truth is by us comprehenſible; that we are capable of being *equal* to God in *Knowledge*; and conſequently, in *every other* Perfection; ſince 'tis neceſſary that where one Perfecton is in an *infinite* Degree, there *all others* muſt be ſo too.---But I will not any farther purſue the Impiety and Abſurdity into which this monſtrous Principle will lead us. Let us proceed rather to examine the

Second Principle into which the *Denial* of Myſteries may be reſolv'd, *viz.* That we can have no ſufficient Evidence, that any *particular* Doctrine is *true*, which is myſterious.

In Oppoſition to this I do maintain

Firſt, That we may have *demonſtrative* Evidence of the Truth of ſome Propoſitions, concerning which very perplexing Difficulties may be rais'd; and ſo, may have the ſtrongeſt Proof that ſome things *are*, and yet be utterly incapable of comprehending the *manner how* the things ſo prov'd can be; *i. e.* we may have, in ſome Caſes, *demonſtrative* Evidence of Doctrines myſterious.

It is a Point capable of rigid Demonſtration, that Matter is not a *neceſſarily Exiſting* Being, nor *Eternal*: It muſt therefore have been, ſtrictly ſpeaking, *Created*: And yet we are incapable of com-

comprehending the *manner* how a thing can be created.

We are, I conceive, very certain, that mere Matter is incapable of any *active* Powers; and conſequently, can't put itſelf into Motion. Whenever therefore it is put in Motion, it muſt be acted upon, either *immediately*, or *mediately* by ſome other Being which is *immaterial*. But who can frame a Notion how an *immaterial* Being can act upon that which is *material*?

Farther; 'Tis capable of certain Proof, that whatever Being is endu'd with *abſolute* Knowledge, muſt be endu'd with *a certain Fore-knowledge* of all future Events. For, whatever certainly exiſts at *any* time, may at *that* Time be the Object of *certain Knowledge*: --Whatever at any Time *certainly* exiſts, was from all Eternity *certainly future*: --And whatever was from Eternity *certainly future*, might from Eternity be *certainly foreknown*. The Conſequence is plain, that *God*, as being endu'd with *abſolute* Knowledge, muſt be endu'd with *a certain Fore-knowledge* of all future Events. 'Tis on the other hand certain, that we have *a Liberty of Action*. This we experience in ourſelves; and whatever Arguments are urg'd againſt it will equally conclude againſt placing Liberty in *any other* Being; and yet 'tis ſtrictly demonſtrable, that there muſt be Liberty ſomewhere or other. But whoſoever ſhall attempt to clear up *all* Difficulties about theſe Truths, and *diſtinctly* to reconcile them with each other, will find himſelf engag'd in an inſuperable Work. We can't conceive how a thing can be *certainly* foreknown, and yet *contingent*; how a thing can be *certainly* future, and yet ſuch as *may* be, or may *not* be. The Points how-

however before-mention'd are doubtleſs *really* conſiſtent with each other: And the appearing Difficulties about reconciling them ariſe from nothing but our preſent *imperfect* Views of things.

But beſide thoſe myſterious Truths, which we are capable of demonſtrating, there are others concerning which we may have ſufficient Evidence even from *human* Teſtimony. For we may, by this method, have ſufficient Evidence of ſome Truths, which we do not *comprehend*; and which are therefore ſo far to *us* myſterious. Can a Man be juſtly blam'd for aſſenting to the Truth of a *Mathematical* Propoſition, tho' by him not comprehended, upon the Teſtimony of Perſons of allow'd Skill in that Science? It can't be doubted but that ſuch his Aſſent is *rational*; eſpecially if he wants Opportunity of making himſelf better acquainted with things of this Nature. And if a Man may give a rational Aſſent to, and conſequently have ſufficient Evidence of, a Propoſition by him not comprehended, He may in *ſome* Inſtances give a rational Aſſent to a Propoſition by him *incomprehenſible*. All that is neceſſary in order to ſuch a rational Aſſent is, that he have *ſome Ideas* of the Terms of the Propoſition; ---that he perceive *no Repugnancy* between them; and conſequently, that (for any thing which appears) the Propoſition may *poſſibly* be true: And, laſtly, that he have ſufficient *external Proof* to determine him rather to embrace than reject it: But in ſeveral Caſes, the Authority of Perſons of undoubted Skill in any particular Science is allow'd to give *ſuch a ſufficient Proof*: And therefore we may have ſufficient Evidence, even from *human* Teſtimony, of Doctrines myſterious.

But

But whatever may be determin'd as to the Argument now produc'd, this notwithstanding must be admitted, that God can, if he pleases, *reveal* the Truth of some mysterious Propositions. That God may make some Revelation to Mankind is as *possible*, as for one Man to declare his Thoughts to another. And tho' we should not be able to frame a perfect Notion of the *Manner how* such a Revelation is made, yet we may be very sure, that in all Communications of this kind, he will afford sufficient means of distinguishing them from Delusions; and consequently, that he will give the utmost Evidence that they came from God. But, if a Revelation in general, be, in the Nature of things, *possible*, then the Revelation of a mysterious Doctrine must be so too. If it be possible for the Divine Being to give us *perfect* Conceptions of some things we knew not before, 'tis as possible for him to give us a short and *imperfect* View of them. And whenever any Doctrines of this kind are thus propos'd to us, we must have the strongest Assurance that they are *really true*; as proceeding from him, who can neither deceive nor be deceiv'd. Thus therefore, if it be possible for the Divine Being to make *any* kind of Revelation, it must be equally so to reveal the Truth of some *mysterious* Doctrines: And if this be admitted, 'tis in the Nature of things *possible* for us to have the highest Assurance of such Truths, as are by us *incomprehensible*.

3. Let us now enquire, *Thirdly*, whether there be any thing *unreasonable* in supposing that God should make a mysterious Doctrine the Matter of Revelation.

This we readily grant, that if ſuch a Suppoſition implies any thing inconſiſtent with God's *Juſtice*, or *Goodneſs*, or *Wiſdom*, it ought not on any account to be admitted: And on the other hand, we may as juſtly expect, that if no ſuch Inconſiſtency can be made appear, then this Suppoſition ſhall be allow'd to be reaſonable.

As to God's *Juſtice*; As we can have no ſtrict Claim to have any Revelation at all made to us, ſo neither can we, that every thing ſhould be reveal'd to the utmoſt Perfection. 'Tis ſufficient for us that whatever God declares muſt be true; and we have no Right to be any farther inform'd concerning any Point than he pleaſes.

As to his *Goodneſs*; Since we cannot in Juſtice demand any Revelation, whatever Revelation he is pleas'd to make muſt be the pure Iſſue of his *Goodneſs*; And 'tis no more inconſiſtent with this Perfection not to impart to us all thoſe Degrees of Knowledge we may be capable of receiving, than 'tis, that he hath not beſtow'd on us all that Good we may be capable of enjoying.

And, Laſtly, as to God's *Wiſdom*; It is allow'd that he never does any thing without a ſufficient Reaſon: And therefore there are doubtleſs very great Reaſons why he hath reveal'd things to us but *in part*; giving ſufficient Evidence that ſome Doctrines are true, without vouchſafing us Light ſufficient to clear up every perplexing Difficulty. But there may very often be ſufficient Reaſons, which do not *evidently appear*; and we may have abundant Ground to think there are Reaſons, which we don't ſee. To pronounce a thing to be *unreaſonable*, 'tis not ſufficient that we *don't ſee* the Reaſon of it; we ought to diſcern its *Inconſiſtency* with ſome evident Reaſon. And therefore,

fore, without diſtinctly accounting for the myſteriouſneſs of our Religion, or producing any particular Arguments why we may preſume God ſhould make it myſterious, we might demand of our Adverſaries a direct Proof of the Principle they maintain; and inſiſt on their demonſtrating that a *wiſe* Being cannot make *a myſterious* Point the Matter of *Revelation.*

I conceive however, we need not be ſo reſerv'd on this Occaſion; becauſe there are ſeveral Reaſons open to us, which will ſerve to clear up this Point. As for Inſtance;

If God ſhould make *any Revelation* to Mankind, it may reaſonably be expected that ſome part of it at leaſt will relate to the *Perfections of his own Nature.* But theſe being all of them ſtrictly *infinite*; and we being incapable of forming any *adequate* Idea of what is infinite, 'tis no Wonder if Doctrines of this Nature ſhould be, in ſeveral reſpects, *myſterious.* For it is obſervable, that perplexing Difficulties attend all ſuch Propoſitions, whoſe Terms imply any thing infinite: And therefore 'tis not demanded, that all Difficulties ſhould be accounted for with reſpect either to *infinite Duration,* or *infinite Space.*

Again; It may reaſonably be expected that whenever ſuch a Revelation is made, it will relate, in ſome meaſure, to the things of *another World,* with which we have no manner of Acquaintance. Our Ideas therefore of theſe things muſt be taken from other Ideas, with which they have ſome ſort of *Reſemblance*; which therefore not exactly repreſenting the things they ſtand for, our Conceptions of them muſt be very *confus'd* and ſhort. And if we ſhall attempt, in theſe Caſes, particularly to explain and account

for things, we ſhall find our ſelves as much at a Loſs, as a Man born Blind would be in his *Account of Colours*. But even in this Caſe the Blind Man may have ſufficient Reaſon to think, that others have a *diſtinct Senſe* from what he enjoys; ---that diſtant Objects do, by this means, produce in them a certain Senſation, which is term'd *Colour*; ---that different Objects can produce *different* Sorts of ſuch a Senſation, *i. e.* different Colours; All this, I ſay, he may have ſufficient Evidence of, and yet have no *diſtinct*, and *determinate* Notion either of Sight or Colours. In like manner with reſpect to Doctrines of Religion, we may have abundant Evidence that ſome things are *true*, without having any *determinate* Ideas of the things themſelves.

Farther; The great End of all Divine Revelation muſt be, to inform us of our Duty, and to enforce the Practice of it. This will, I conceive, be eaſily granted me: From whence we may argue, that ſince our Actions are very much govern'd by the Scheme of Doctrines we entertain, it will be expedient that ſuch *doctrinal* Truths be reveal'd, as have a *practical* Influence. Theſe once propos'd by a Divine Authority will have the higheſt Evidence of Truth; and carefully attended to will be as greatly ſerviceable to Virtue: And therefore there is abundant Reaſon why *Doctrines*, as well as Duties, ſhould be Matter of *Revelation*. But tho' a firm Perſwaſion concerning ſuch *Truths* may be conducive to this End, yet *a diſtinct* and *perfect* Apprehenſion of *all* that relates to them may be uſeleſs and unneceſſary. That *Good Men ſhall receive Rewards in another Life*, is a ſtrong Motive to Obedience; but to be inform'd particularly

larly *what* these Rewards shall be, and *where* dispens'd, can only gratify a Curiosity. That *the Father sent his own Son into the World, to punish Sin in his Person, and to pardon it for his Sufferings*, gives us the highest Ideas of the Divine *Purity*, *Justice* and *Mercy*. This Consideration, duly attended to, is the greatest Discouragement from Sinning. But to be able to solve *all* Difficulties relating to this Point; To be able exactly to account for *The Distinction between the Father and the Son*;---*The Generation of the Son*; ---*The Union of the Divine and Human Natures*; ---*The Satisfaction made by the Sufferings of Christ*, and the like, is by no means useful to this purpose. The Intention of the Gospel was to make us *Wise* indeed; but then 'twas to make us Wise *only* to Salvation. And for this Reason, it may be presum'd, so much Light hath been vouchsaf'd us as will promote this End; and all beyond it hath been with-held as unnecessary.

What farther Degrees of Knowledge may be imparted to us in another State, it will be an high Presumption to determine: because we know not particularly *what* that State will be; nor, consequently, how expedient it may prove that we should have a *distinct* View of Things. However, thus much in general the Holy Scriptures assure us, that both our *Knowledge* and Happiness will be highly improv'd; and that many of the Difficulties, with which we now perplex our selves, shall vanish. In the mean Time, whilst we are only travelling to a better Place, let us follow the sure Guide which is given us; and not disquiet either our selves or others, because we cannot nicely account for *every* Curiosity in the way. Many things *may* be

be true; and we may have *ſufficient Evidence* that they are true, tho' attended with Difficulties. This is allow'd in Matters of *pure Reaſoning*: And every Man aſſents to numberleſs Propoſitions which he cannot entirely clear up. Let the ſame Priviledge be allow'd to *Religious* Doctrines: Since God may, if he pleaſes, reveal a thing but *in part*; and ſeveral Conſiderations may be aſſign'd why ſome things ſhould be *myſterious*. I ſhall now under my

Third, and *Laſt* General Head, make ſome proper Reflexions on what hath been offer'd.

A *Chriſtian Myſtery* (agreeably to the Account before given) is a Doctrine, concerning which our Ideas are either *inadequate* or *indeterminate*: A Doctrine, which is therefore attended with Difficulties which we cannot particularly account for: And which being of it ſelf *inevident*, and *above our Reaſon*, we receive purely on the Authority of the *Revealer*. I remark upon this Account, that all Attempts towards diſtinctly *explaining* the Myſteries of Chriſtianity, are *unwarrantable*, and *dangerous*.

They are *unwarrantable*, becauſe we can have no ſufficient Ground on which to build ſuch Explications. If the Doctrines, which Men attempt to explain, are, in the higheſt Senſe, *myſterious*, then are they by us *inexplicable*; and if they are by us *explicable*, they ceaſe to be *myſterious*. We neither do, nor can, know any thing farther concerning theſe Points, than what God hath been pleas'd to reveal to us: And if he hath left ſome particulars relating to theſe Points *obſcure*, they will and muſt remain ſo, notwithſtanding

ſtanding our greateſt Labour ſpent in *explaining* them.

'Tis evident, I conceive, that we can never be ſure our Explications are *true*, becauſe we have no certain Principles to build on. But beſide this 'tis worth our Notice, that it is almoſt infinite Odds but they are *falſe*. Errors are numberleſs, whilſt Truth can be but one: And ſince we have nothing to direct us in ſuch an Attempt but Fancy, we have the ſame Chance to pitch on *any One* of theſe numberleſs Errors, as on the Truth: And therefore by thus going beyond our depth, we make our falling into Errors almoſt unavoidable.

It is true indeed, any Pains taken in fixing the *Meaning of the Words*; in *ſtating the Doctrines*; or *freeing them* from the Charge of *Contradiction*, will be uſefully employ'd: Becauſe, whatever Doctrines have been deliver'd by God, he hath given withal ſufficient Means of rightly underſtanding them: And it is our Duty to uſe our beſt Endeavours both to underſtand them rightly, and to clear them from ſuch Objections as may be urg'd againſt them. But to proceed farther than this; To Frame *Hypotheſes* by which to *ſolve* Difficulties by us *inſolveable*, and to *explain* things by us *inexplicable*, is (to uſe the ſofteſt Expreſſion) a very extraordinary Proceeding.

But beſide that Attempts of this nature are *unwarrantable*, they are in like Manner of *dangerous* Conſequence. They will miniſter Occaſion of much uſeleſs Diſpute, perhaps to the Loſs of Charity. Such Hypotheſes being entirely *arbitrary* and without *real* Ground, 'tis no Wonder if the plauſible Attempts of ſome be encounter'd by as plauſible Schemes of others.

Thus

Thus is there a Way open'd for endleſs Diſpute and Animoſity!

Nor is it to be expected but that *Hereſy* it ſelf will ſpring from this Root. Unleſs a Man be exceeding cautious, his very Explication may be *inconſiſtent* with the myſterious Doctrine he explains: ---Or, if it ſhould not be evidently ſo, yet it may be inconſiſtent with ſome *other Doctrine* of great Moment; ---Or if he ſhould be ſo happy as to keep himſelf clear of this, yet Occaſion may be taken from ſome *unguarded* Expreſſions of propagating very *pernicious* Errors. Perhaps if it were examin'd into 'twould be found, that many Hereſies have taken their Riſe from hence; and that ſome Great and Good Men, imprudently *trying Practices* on Myſteries, have done irreparable Miſchief to that very Cauſe for which they were ſo zealous.

Let us take one Conſideration more along with us. All Explications of this Nature are imaginary and without Grounds; and it is mighty Odds but they are liable to many apparent Objections. But the Enemies of our Religion will not diſtinguiſh between the *Explication* and the *Doctrine*: And all the Inconſiſtencies they diſcover in the *one*, will be imputed to the *other*. Thus may a Doctrine be moſt effectually betray'd by an imprudent Defence of it.

Another Remark on what hath been deliver'd ſhall be this. Since the *Chriſtian Myſteries*, I have been contending for, are Doctrines by us *incomprehenſible*, and of themſelves *inevident*; The Certainty we have of their Truth muſt be founded on the Certainty of that *external Evidence* by which they are prov'd. Now this can be none other than an Evidence that they have been de-

liver'd

liver'd by God; and may therefore be reſolv'd into theſe Two Points: Firſt, that the Scripture is *the Word of God.* And, in the next Place, That Such myſterious Doctrines are contain'd *in Scripture.* The former of theſe Points being ſuppos'd, I ſhall thus remark concerning the latter: ---We ought not to allow that a myſterious Doctrine is contain'd in Scripture, without *plain and clear Proof* that it is ſo: Otherwiſe, we ſhould allow ſuch a Doctrine to be true, without plain and clear Proof that it is true. This Remark is level'd againſt ſuch, as being pleas'd with nothing in Religion but *Myſtery*, uſe their utmoſt Endeavours to ſtrain and force plain Places of Scripture to a myſterious Senſe.

It is, I conceive, allow'd by all ſober Perſons, that Scripture is to be underſtood in its moſt *obvious* Senſe, unleſs there appear very great Reaſon to interpret it otherwiſe. For, theſe Writings being intended for the *general Uſe* of Mankind, it is reaſonable to underſtand them in ſuch a Senſe as is *obvious* to Mankind. Beſides, we ourſelves object againſt the *Socinians*, becauſe they decline the obvious Senſe of Scripture, and have recourſe to *figurative* Interpretations, purely to *avoid* Myſteries: But this ſtrong Objection equally concludes againſt declining the obvious Senſe in order to *introduce* Myſteries. Add to this, that if ſuch a looſe Way of interpreting Scripture be once admitted, our Religion muſt infinitely vary. Theſe *figurative* Interpretations, depending entirely upon Imagination and Fancy, muſt be as various as are Mens different Ways of thinking. So that unleſs we ſtick to the moſt obvious Senſe of Scripture, in all Caſes where there is not *great Neceſſity* of de-

clining it, we can never maintain the *Conſiſtency* of our Religion, nor guard againſt the Encroachments of *Enthuſiaſm.*

I remark, Laſtly, that ſince we are to account thoſe religious Doctrines alone Myſterious, which we *cannot comprehend*; therefore we are not to receive any Doctrines, under the Notion of *Myſteries*, which carry with them any plain and evident *Contradiction:* For, Such we do comprehend; at leaſt, we have ſo perfect a View of them, as to ſee it is impoſſible they ſhould be true. 'Tis upon this Ground that we reject the Doctrine of *Tranſubſtantiation:* For, it implies in it ſeveral manifeſt Abſurdities. The obtruding it therefore on us, under the Notion of a Myſtery, is an high Affront offer'd to Religion; And ſerves but to expoſe venerable Truths to the Scoffs of Infidels.

It is true indeed, it becomes us not to pronounce haſtily concerning a Doctrine, which ſeems to be countenanc'd by Scripture; We *may be* and often *are* miſtaken in our Judgments; and, upon a deeper Search, thoſe Difficulties vaniſh, which at firſt appear'd ſo formidable. However, if, after all, there *evidently appears* to be any Contradiction in ſuch a Doctrine, we may conclude, that 'tis not *really* taught in Scripture; ſince *no Contradictions* can be true, and *no falſe* Doctrines can be taught by God.

It is therefore an over-pious Strain of ſome Good Men, who aſſert, that we muſt *deny our Reaſon* in Matters of Religion; and that Doctrines, however *apparently Abſurd*, muſt be receiv'd when recommended under that ſacred Name. Thoſe who maintain this Poſition don't conſider, that they do at the ſame Time overthrow

throw the very Foundations of Religion. For, beſide that it is in it ſelf *impoſſible* that a Man ſhould be *perſwaded* of the Truth of a Propoſition, which he at the ſame time *believes* to be abſurd; beſide this, I ſay, ſuch a denying our Reaſon, in *one* point, (were it poſſible) muſt deſtroy the uſe of it in *all others*. If a Man ſhould be ſatisfied of the *Truth* of a Propoſition which *appears* to him to be abſurd, he might as well be ſatisfied of the *Falſhood* of a Propoſition which *appears* to him to be demonſtrable. Upon this Suppoſition, no Arguments can be urg'd, on which ſecurely to build our Faith.

We are indeed liable to miſtakes; and therefore (as hath been already obſerv'd,) ought not to be over-haſty in our Deciſions: We ſhould examine Things with the utmoſt Care, eſpecially in ſo important a Concern as that before us. But if any Point ſhould, after all, *appear* to be a Contradiction, 'twill be in vain to urge it as *a Matter of Faith:* For, as nothing can be *really* requir'd by God as a Matter of Faith, which is *really* a Contradiction, ſo we can't *preſume* any thing to be ſuch a Matter of Faith which *appears to us* to be a Contradiction. This Caſe therefore, as 'tis ſometimes ſtated, *viz.* "If "a Man ſhould be *perſwaded* that God has re- "veal'd a Doctrine, which *appears* to him to be "a Contradiction, he is oblig'd to receive it as "true," ſeems to be built on an *impoſſible Suppoſition.* For, God cannot reveal a Doctrine which is *really* a Contradiction: And ſince we have none other Way of judging of a Contradiction, but by its *appearing*, after due Examination, to be ſuch to our Reaſon; it follows, that whatever *ſo appears* to us, we muſt believe

is *not taught* by God; and conſequently, all thoſe Paſſages of Scripture which literally underſtood, *appear* to imply any ſuch Abſurdity, muſt be interpreted in *a figurative* Senſe.

---To return;

Doctrines *truly* myſterious are ſuch, at leaſt, as (for any thing which can be prov'd to the contrary) *may* be true; and therefore, when ſupported by a Divine Authority, we are certain *muſt* be true. It follows, that our Aſſent to ſuch is not a *blind*, but a *rational* Faith; as being founded on this ſure Principle of Reaſon, that *God cannot deceive*. Here muſt we fix our ſelves: And if Men will not be perſwaded; nor attend to the Deductions of that Reaſon, for which they would ſeem ſo zealous, 'tis in vain to argue farther. We can only refer them for fuller Conviction to the Deciſions of the laſt Great Day.

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